

# Thomas J. Kiernan and Irish diplomatic responses to cold-war anti-communism in Australia, 1946-1951

*Gerard Madden*

**Abstract** Despite being a peripheral actor in the Cold War, Ireland in the immediate post-war period was attentive to cold war developments internationally, and the influence of the Catholic Church over state and society predominantly shaped the state's response to the conflict. Irish diplomats internationally sent home reports on communist activity in the countries in which they served. This article will discuss Thomas J. Kiernan, Ireland's Minister Plenipotentiary in Australia between 1946 and 1955, and his responses, views and perceptions of Australian anti-communism from his 1946 appointment to the 1951 plebiscite on banning the Communist Party of Australia, which ultimately failed. Through analysis of his reports in the National Archives of Ireland – including accounts of his interactions with politicians and clergy, the Australian press, parliamentary debates and other sources – it argues that his views were moulded by the dominant Irish conception of the Cold War, which was fundamentally shaped by Catholicism, and his overreliance on Catholic and print sources led him to sometimes exaggerate the communist threat. Nonetheless, his reports home to Dublin served to reinforce the Irish state's perception that communism was a worldwide malaise which the Catholic Church and Catholics internationally were at the forefront of combatting.

**Keywords:** Ireland, Australia, Anti-communism, Diplomacy, Cold War

It is of Irish interest to note the names of some of Australia's leading communists – Moran, Sharkey, Blake ... of Irish descent obviously', the Dublin Catholic periodical *Hibernia* observed in

1945.<sup>1</sup> The publication was far from alone in Ireland in taking note of Australian communism, as well as responses to it from the Australian state, the Australian Catholic hierarchy and lay Australian Catholics. Diplomatic links between Ireland and Australia took root in the immediate post-war years, in large part due to the coming to power of an friendly Labor government in Canberra in 1941; and in October 1946 Thomas J. Kiernan was appointed as Ireland's Minister Plenipotentiary in Australia, a post he held until 1955. Patrick O'Farrell noted that while Kiernan's role was primarily focused on promoting Irish culture and history in Australia – his wife was the famous Irish singer Delia Murphy – this was far from the entirety of his mission's remit. Kiernan had an important role in monitoring the domestic political situation in Australia and fostering connections with the Irish community there on behalf of the Irish state.<sup>2</sup>

Kate O'Malley emphasises that the Minister Plenipotentiary's brief – he was not formally referred to as an ambassador until 1950, Ireland having left the Commonwealth the previous year – extended to reporting on affairs in Asia generally, not just Australia.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the nascent Cold War was an important priority of the young mission, and in 1949 Kiernan sent home to Ireland information on the communist takeover of Peking (Beijing), gleaned from diplomatic and clerical figures residing in Canberra who had visited mainland China.<sup>4</sup> However, the Irish foreign ministry, the Department of External Affairs, was also interested in the 'threat' of communism in Australia itself. It requested in 1947 that it be kept abreast of the activities of the Communist Party of Australia, as well as responses to it by the Australian state and wider society, seeing Australia's struggle against communist activity as part of a worldwide battle which also involved Ireland. That year Colonel Dan Bryan, Ireland's Director of Military Intelligence, described the Australian communist movement as a 'fifth column' identical to the communist movement within Ireland itself, except the latter's numbers 'were not so large'.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter, Kiernan regularly sent information on important anti-communist developments in Australia home to Iveagh House, the headquarters of the Department of External Affairs situated at St Stephen's Green in Dublin.

This article analyses Kiernan's responses, views and perceptions of domestic Australian anti-communism during his tenure in Canberra

from 1946 to 1951, covering the early period of the domestic Cold War in Australia, from his appointment to Canberra to the failed 1951 referendum on the banning of the Communist Party of Australia. It contextualises the image of Australia's domestic Cold War he constructed in his writings in relation to the concerns of the Irish state about communist activity internationally, particularly in countries with large Irish communities. It argues that Kiernan's interpretation of the communist 'threat' was influenced by the cultural and ideological conception of early cold war discourses prevalent in Ireland, with Catholic anti-communism being the central element of this – serving as a case study which adds to the growing scholarship of how ideological preconditions shaped responses by diplomats to the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> It begins by discussing the transnational links between Irish and Australian anti-communism, with the important role of Catholicism in both Irish and Australian anti-communism being particularly prominent here. While Australia, unlike Ireland, was not a majority-Catholic country, key works on Catholicism and anti-communism in post-war Australia have established the significance and salience of Catholicism in shaping Australian anti-communism through the impact of Catholic interventions against communism in the country, as this article will highlight. This was marked in particular by the role of lay Catholic activists in confronting communist influence within the country's trade unions, which had a large Catholic membership due to the disproportionately working-class nature of Australia's Catholic community.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, given that the mid-twentieth century marked the apex of Catholic influence over state and society in independent Ireland, this was a factor Kiernan repeatedly emphasised in his reports home.

This article draws predominantly from Kiernan's reports contained in the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), which include his records of interactions with politicians and clergy, the Australian press, parliamentary debates and other documentary sources. These records allow us to interrogate his perceptions through the documentary material he sent home to Dublin. While much of the material sent home by Kiernan was publicly reported information on issues within Australian politics already known to present-day scholars – with the exception of the details he gives of conversations with senior politicians and ecclesiastical

figures – this source is important as it provides information on Kiernan's perceptions of the Cold War in Australia. It helps to deepen our understanding of the Irish state's response to the Cold War, and how Kiernan's networks amongst the Irish-Australian Catholic community moulded and reinforced his perceptions of Australian communism and state and Catholic attempts to counteract communist activity.

The article begins by discussing Kiernan's analyses of Australian communism in the late 1940s, which dealt predominantly with the Communist Party of Australia's (CPA) involvement in the Australian labour movement, and the efforts of Ben Chifley's Australian Labor Party (ALP) government to counteract communist influence within the country's trade unions. Given the Australian labour movement consisted of many Irish Catholic workers, it became an area of action in the Catholic Church's own fight against communism in Australia, and Kiernan's perceptions here add to our knowledge of the Australian labour movement and its connections with Ireland. It then explores Kiernan's responses to the anti-communist policies of Robert Menzies's Liberal/Country Party coalition government, which came to power in December 1949. Menzies succeeded in passing the Communist Party Dissolution Act, which formally banned the CPA, but the act was ruled unconstitutional in March 1951 and was narrowly defeated in a referendum the following November. This article will explore the sources on which Kiernan relied and will analyse how they shaped his reports on Australia's domestic Cold War. It will further evaluate the perspicacity and veracity of Kiernan's reports, analysing the accuracy of his analyses of the CPA and state and Catholic efforts to oppose its influence.

### **The Cold War in Ireland and Australia – an overview**

During the Cold War, countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain looked inward to uncover people allegedly sympathetic to the other side, instanced by 'persecution of Titoists in Eastern Europe, McCarthyism in the USA'.<sup>8</sup> The United States, the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth nations sought to coordinate their responses to the common threat of communism in a manner that was collaborative and

interconnected.<sup>9</sup> Given the weakness of the Irish communist movement, Ireland did not join these other states in this effort, and it declined a Canadian approach to exchange information on communist suspects in 1951, as 'the number of known Irish supporters of the communist programme is extremely small'.<sup>10</sup> While continuing its traditional neutrality by remaining outside NATO, Irish military intelligence maintained its wartime cooperation with MI5 in Britain, nonetheless, and sharing of intelligence on communists took place.<sup>11</sup> The state monitored communist-aligned groups in the Irish diaspora, such as the Connolly Association in Britain and the identically named group in the United States, and the police informally shared intelligence on suspected communists with the US legation in Dublin.<sup>12</sup>

Despite being a state on the periphery of the Cold War with a negligible communist presence, Ireland was attentive to the responses of other anglophone countries to communism. During the early Cold War, Irish diplomats in the United States, Britain and Commonwealth countries forwarded information on domestic efforts to curtail communist activity in the nations they were assigned to. For instance, John J. Hearne, the Irish High Commissioner in Ottawa, assiduously compiled reports on anti-communist developments in Canada from 1947 onwards for review by officials at home.<sup>13</sup> Hearne was appointed as Ireland's ambassador to the United States in 1950, and continued to send information to Iveagh House on anti-communist developments there, notably the career of the Irish-American Senator Joseph McCarthy. While McCarthy placed relatively little emphasis on his Irishness or Catholicism in his political career, Irish media coverage of his activities highlighted both of these aspects – which highlights how Irish perceptions of anti-communism in countries with large Irish diasporas were frequently filtered through an Irish Catholic ethnic prism.<sup>14</sup>

The United States was not the only Anglophone country where anti-communism attracted popular attention in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s. Under the headline 'Red agents busy in Australia', the *Irish Times* highlighted the former Australian prime minister Billy Hughes's claim at a 1946 Liberal Party meeting in Sydney that 'Australia and every other nation has Russian agents working to undermine it'.<sup>15</sup> The *Sunday Independent*, also a leading Irish broadsheet, noted the

Australian Catholic hierarchy's 1947 warning, contained in the document *Peace in Industry*, that the CPA was seeking to 'overthrow the machinery of government and seize political power to achieve the end of communism'.<sup>16</sup> The *Irish Times* later gave attention to the ALP's attempts to challenge communist influence in Australia's trade unions, noting a 1949 warning by party leaders at a Sydney conference that an Australian labour movement under communist influence would degenerate into a 'disorganised rabble, led by a few agitators'.<sup>17</sup> While it is unclear from state files whether Kiernan's reports informed Irish press coverage of Australian communism, they are indicative of the domestic anti-communist narrative in Ireland which framed his reports.

Most Irish Catholics in the period viewed the Cold War through a Catholic lens, with developments in the wider Catholic world gaining particular attention. Events such as the arrests of Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac by the post-war government of Yugoslavia and Cardinal József Mindszenty by the Stalinist regime in Hungary caused outrage among Catholics in Ireland, as they did among Catholics internationally. Irish Catholic concerns about the Cold War were further underlined when Irish lay Catholics responded to an appeal by the Irish hierarchy which raised £60,000 for Italian lay Catholic Action groups campaigning for the Christian Democrats prior to the Italian general election of 1948, amid fears that a communist victory would imperil Pius XII's position in the Vatican.<sup>18</sup> The Irish state vigorously condemned the convictions of Mindszenty and Stepinac, and followed the Irish Catholic Church – and the United States – in funding Italian Catholic Action during the general election.<sup>19</sup>

Cold war developments which impacted Ireland's clerical diaspora had a particular resonance. The imprisonments, killings and expulsions of members of the Columban Order – a missionary religious order founded in Ireland in 1917 and dedicated to missionary activity in China – during and following the communist victory in the Chinese Revolution attracted intense attention in Ireland. Many Columbans were later active in Korea and the Philippines, where their activities also helped to influence Irish perceptions of the Cold War. As noted above, the Irish legation in Canberra was an important source for the Department of External Affairs regarding events in China, notably the

persecution of Catholicism there.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Australia, where the Holy See was represented by an Apostolic Delegate with no diplomatic status – the position was described as ‘a post office’ between the Australian bishops and Rome by one holder – Ireland enjoyed formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See.<sup>21</sup> The importance the Irish state placed on this underlined its conception of itself as a Catholic power.<sup>22</sup>

Australian anti-communism particularly attracted Irish awareness because the Catholic Church was a significant and salient element of Australia’s domestic Cold War. This was aided by the undisputed prominence of Irish-Australians within Australia’s Catholic Church until the 1960s. Daniel Mannix, a Cork native and Archbishop of Melbourne from 1917 to 1963, was an assiduous supporter of the intervention of Catholic Action activists in Australia’s political arena.<sup>23</sup> The fact that leading figures in both the Communist Party of New Zealand and the Communist Party of Australia were of Irish Catholic descent heightened concerns about communism amongst Catholics in both countries. The situation in the two polities differed, however. New Zealand’s Catholic community was small, and focused on ‘encouraging trends that already existed in the two main political parties’ in its anti-communist activities; while Catholics made up around a quarter of the Australian population, making Catholic anti-communism an important factor in twentieth-century Australian politics.<sup>24</sup> Given the global importance of interactions between clergy and politicians in shaping the Cold War, as scholars such as Dianne Kirby have highlighted in their work on the importance of religion in the Cold War, it was unsurprising that the views of Australian Catholics would help inform Kiernan’s reports.<sup>25</sup>

In the wider cultural context, during this period visiting clergy and lay Catholic activists from Australia spoke to Irish audiences about the communist ‘infiltration’ of the Australian labour movement, helping to mould the ideological parameters Kiernan operated within. In 1947, for instance, R.G. Hodgkinson, a member of the Melbourne Catholic Young Men’s Society (CYMS), an international lay Catholic organisation formed in Ireland in 1849, discussed Australian lay Catholic attempts to counteract communist influence within trade unions during an address to members of Cork’s CYMS branch. Hodgkinson told attendees that communism would be defeated, not by adopting ‘nega-

tive' measures towards it, but rather by 'the advancement of Christian ideals in the world'.<sup>26</sup> A.M. Crofts, a Cork-born Dominican and Prior of St Dominic's, Melbourne, warned in 1950 that communists had gained control of Australia's main industrial unions, including those represented by coal-miners, dockers and railwaymen. Australia's Catholics, Crofts concluded, were 'bracing themselves for the work that lay ahead' in the fight against communism.<sup>27</sup> P.M. O'Donnell, the Coadjutor Archbishop of Brisbane, informed local journalists on a 1950 visit to his family in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, that the Australian Catholic Church was 'throwing its whole weight and influence in the battle against communism, and in Australia the Church's weight and influence was very considerable indeed'.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, leading members of the Irish Catholic hierarchy also visited Australia, and were familiar with the cold war situation in the country. Speaking to worshippers at Galway in July 1948 after returning from the Archdiocese of Melbourne's centenary celebrations, Bishop Michael Browne of Galway declared that Australian communists were trying, 'by causing disturbances and strikes, to shake the very foundations of the social and economic system'.<sup>29</sup> John Charles McQuaid, the staunchly anti-communist Archbishop of Dublin, personally met Archbishop Mannix and the controversial Catholic layman Bartholomew Augustine (B.A.) Santamaria during the 1953 Sydney Eucharistic Congress. Noting McQuaid's presence at the Congress during a speech to attendees, Santamaria asserted that 'from Ireland we have drawn our firm determination to oppose the enemies of freedom in whatever guise they may present themselves'.<sup>30</sup>

The Movement, the secretive Catholic organisation dominated by Santamaria, was a central element of Australian anti-communism, and would influence Kiernan's reports.<sup>31</sup> Santamaria, a protégé of Archbishop Mannix, dominated Australia's Catholic Action movement in the 1940s and 1950s and had a major impact on Australian politics through the Movement's influence within the ALP. Brenda Niall has suggested similarities between Santamaria and Éamon de Valera, with whom Mannix, who had opposed the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty, was also close; like de Valera, Santamaria possessed 'religious fervour, social disadvantage and an extraordinary self-belief'.<sup>32</sup> While not himself of



Irish ancestry – he was of Sicilian descent – Santamaria could not but be aware of the predominantly Irish background of his fellow Catholics in a country where ‘the terms Irish and Catholic were almost interchangeable’ until the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> As a lay Catholic student activist in 1930s Melbourne, he had compared religious persecution in the Soviet Union and China to anti-Catholicism in Scotland and Northern Ireland, in order to better appeal to the sentiments of Catholic Irish-Australians.<sup>34</sup>

Australians of Irish descent were naturally a vital part of the Movement’s efforts within the unions;<sup>35</sup> and Fr William Hackett, a Co. Kilkenny-born Jesuit, served as the Movement’s chaplain – and Mannix’s official representative – in the organisation.<sup>36</sup> The Movement was an influential force within the Industrial Groups – bodies set up by the ALP in the 1940s to combat the CPA’s influence in the unions by displacing communist union officials with ‘trusted’ ALP members. This intervention by the ALP – which placed emphasis on combating communism within the industrial, rather than the parliamentary, sphere – had no close parallels elsewhere in the anglophone world.<sup>37</sup> The Movement’s members became the foot-soldiers of the Industrial Groups, whose supporters were popularly referred to as ‘Groupers’ by opponents. In Fitzgerald’s words, the Groups allowed the Movement to ‘cloak anti-communist activity and to serve as a vehicle in which the Movement could extend its activities undetected interstate’ – including in New South Wales, where Cardinal Gilroy of Sydney was less cooperative with the Movement than Mannix was in Melbourne.<sup>38</sup> The Movement’s success in wresting key unions away from communist control through the Industrial Groups gained the admiration of lay Catholics abroad, including Britain’s Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. The Movement was distinct from its foreign admirers, however, both in the level of episcopal support it enjoyed and in being under the domineering control of Santamaria.<sup>39</sup>

The Movement was a deeply controversial force in Australian politics, even amongst non-Catholics who shared its anti-communism, and its influence within the ALP was particularly divisive. Most Australian Catholics were working-class in background, and since the late nineteenth century they had been naturally inclined towards Labor, aided by the fact that, in the eyes of Catholic workers, other parties were identi-

fied with Protestantism. This was recognised by Australia's bishops, and leading figures in the Australian hierarchy such as Sydney's Cardinal Moran had cultivated good relationships with the ALP. This link had begun to erode by the mid-twentieth century as Australian Catholics of Irish ancestry became more prosperous and open to voting for the Liberals and other parties. Nonetheless, in the late 1940s and early 1950s around 55 per cent of ALP federal conference delegates had Irish Catholic ancestry, while 60 per cent of ALP elected representatives were Catholic. Labor leader H.V. (Bert) Evatt's decision to move against the ALP internally played an important role in Santamaria's 1954 move to set up the rival Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which, gaining Mannix's imprimatur, significantly weakened the traditional Catholic Irish-Australian attachment to the ALP, and contributed to the party being out of office federally until 1972. This underlined the importance of Catholics in Australian politics during the period.<sup>40</sup>

Kiernan, 'an exact and fluent writer [who] studied the social and political situations on each of his tours of duty', was naturally close to these leading figures in Australian Catholicism during his time in Canberra. Born in 1897 in Rathmines, Co. Dublin, he was a graduate of University College Dublin who entered the pre-independence British civil service in 1916 as a clerk, his father's profession. Joining the civil service of the newly founded Irish Free State in 1922, he transferred to the Department of External Affairs in 1924. Commencing his career as a diplomat, he was appointed secretary to the Irish high commissioner's office in London, a post he held until 1935, during a crucial period in Anglo-Irish relations. After an interregnum from his diplomatic career where he served as head of Radio Éireann, Ireland's state broadcaster, he was made Ireland's minister to the Holy See in 1941. He remained in this position until his appointment as Ireland's first Minister Plenipotentiary to Australia in 1946, building strong links with Irish religious communities in Rome. He became acquainted with Pope Pius XII, and later wrote a biography of the Pontiff. Reporting home on the rise of Italian communism at the end of the war, he warned Dublin in 1944 that 'the Communist Party – apparently flush with funds – is making headway in all the towns and villages, feeding people provided they belong to the party'. Many of Kiernan's experiences in Rome were

paralleled in his subsequent experience in Canberra, including his embeddedness in clerical networks and his monitoring of communist activity and counter-activity.<sup>41</sup>

Given his familiarity with clerical politics, Kiernan naturally developed a cordial relationship with Mannix on his arrival, and his interactions with the Archbishop regularly featured in his reports home. For instance, shortly after his arrival in 1946 he informed Iveagh House of Mannix's very poor impression of Archbishop Giovanni Panico, the Holy See's apostolic delegate to Australia and New Zealand, who was controversial for his encouragement of the promotion of native-born priests as bishops instead of Irish-born clergy. Panico reportedly wanted to take charge of the Holy See's diplomatic mission in Dublin, a matter of personal as well as professional interest to Kiernan given his previous role.<sup>42</sup> Kiernan's reports on Australian communism were thus influenced by the pronouncements of Australia's Catholic hierarchy, Catholic Action organisations, and the country's Catholic press – reflecting the broader and widely felt Catholic anti-communist attitudes in Ireland

Communist influence within the Australian trade union movement was an important theme of Kiernan's minutes from the outset, given the CPA's industrial strength. The Department of External Affairs asked him in April 1947 for information on instances of Australian communists 'infiltrating the public service, gaining control of labour unions, etc', as it was concerned that communists globally were 'engineering strikes and industrial disturbances with the object of creating shortages of essential goods and causing discontent and resentment amongst the general public'.<sup>43</sup> Australia was seen by Dublin as a particular case in point. The CPA's membership grew during the Second World War, reaching 22,052 by 1944. Concurrently, its influence expanded within the country's trade unions, to an extent disproportionate to its electoral support and rank-and-file membership. By 1945 it possessed majorities or near majorities on many state and provincial trades and labour councils, had its resolutions passed at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) annual congress, and dictated the policies of unions covering almost 'every basic industry at the federal level'. Nonetheless, while the CPA was prominent in the wave of strike activity which occurred in Australia immediately after the Second World War, this strength

would prove fleeting. Its influence within Australian trade unionism had declined markedly by 1950, with the Industrial Groups defeating the CPA in leadership ballots in 'nearly all key trade unions' by the end of the decade.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the CPA's influence within the unions was hamstrung by the use of 'instruments of the state – governments, courts, the press and security services' – against the CPA, as well as the enduring allegiance of the Australian working class to the ALP, and to 'piecemeal reform and constitutional change'.<sup>45</sup>

In June 1947, Kiernan noted that communists had gained control of some of Australia's most important unions, including those representing builders, ironworkers, boiler-makers, dockers, munition workers, coal miners, amalgamated engineers, rail and tramwaymen and hospital workers. He also recorded that a former Labor prime minister, J.H. Scullin, had told him that communist infiltration of the Australian navy had recently been discovered.<sup>46</sup> He paid particularly close attention to the attempts by Santamaria's Movement to counteract communist activity within the unions. Santamaria sought to cultivate relationships with diplomats in Australia, and recent scholarship has indicated that the Movement had significant links with the US embassy in Canberra, which secretly siphoned large amounts of literature and money to the Movement in the 1950s.<sup>47</sup> It also had an incidental, but interesting, relationship with the Irish mission in Canberra in the late 1940s.

Through his acquaintance with Fr William Hackett, Kiernan was able to keep abreast of the Movement's activities within Australia's trade unions, Hackett informing him in June 1947 that its policy 'was to give the communists plenty of rope at this stage'. Ireland's chargé d'affaires in Canberra, Brendan O'Riordan, had met Hackett and Santamaria earlier in 1947, and they had promised him a copy of a confidential Movement report on communist infiltration of Australian trade unionism, if Australia's hierarchy, for whom the report was written, consented.<sup>48</sup> This demonstrates how the Irish legation's networks among the Irish-Australian community, cultivated by Kiernan, were used to acquire information on communist activity and anti-communist movements in the country, a natural development given the involvement of Irish Catholic Australians in anti-communist networks. While his brief in monitoring communism was motivated by the direction of Iveagh

House and their concern about the growth of communism internationally, the Irish legation's links with Australia's Irish community further helped to drive Kiernan's engagement with communism.

In 1945 Santamaria had suffered a major embarrassment, when, in circumstances that are still disputed, a Movement report meant for the hierarchy was mislaid and subsequently obtained by the CPA, who gleefully reproduced it in a pamphlet alleging that Catholic Action was interfering in Australian trade unionism.<sup>49</sup> In the wake of this event, Santamaria had placed a renewed emphasis on secrecy, and this is illustrated by his subsequent reply to O'Riordan – that the Irish mission could have the report, but only if O'Riordan collected it from Santamaria personally, as he would not risk posting it.<sup>50</sup> Kiernan forwarded the report to Iveagh House a month later, asserting in an attached minute that the Movement consisted of '3,000 carefully selected members working anonymously, in an organised fashion, in factories, trade unions, community centres, etc'.<sup>51</sup>

Newspaper clippings were also a key means through which Kiernan appraised anti-communist developments in Australia. In March 1948, he forwarded to Iveagh House a *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper clipping highlighting a meeting of ten communist-controlled labour unions in the city. Kiernan's attached minute identified the meeting as significant, as it suggested that communist-inspired labour troubles in Queensland risked spreading to Victoria and New South Wales.<sup>52</sup> He also highlighted a statement in Melbourne's Catholic *Advocate* newspaper, which warned that the main question facing the Queensland labour movement was whether it would be controlled by communists, 'dedicated to direct action, sabotage and the service of a foreign power', or non-communists, guided by 'common sense, moderation and the Australian tradition of the rule of law in international relations'. Kiernan believed that the statement 'presumably expresses the views of Archbishop Mannix', though such identification of the paper's output with Mannix's viewpoint would later lead him to misinterpret the Archbishop's views, an example of the occasional misreadings contained in some of his reports.<sup>53</sup> In March 1949, he noted that, in the 'first firm action taken by the Chifley government against the Australian Communists', the General Secretary of the Australian Communist Party, Lance Sharkey, had been charged

with sedition. Kiernan highlighted verbal protests and threatened strike action from the Seamen's Union, the Combined Mining Unions' Council and the Sheet Metal Workers' Union in response to the decision. He felt the move was designed to appeal to middle-class swing voters and was also a precaution in case war with the Soviet Union broke out.<sup>54</sup> Kiernan's claim here is also questionable, as the sedition charges against Sharkey and other Australian communists had more to do with the ALP's efforts to wrestle with the threat of the CPA within the unions, as Deery and Redfern highlight.<sup>55</sup>

Communist influence within Australia's miners' unions became particularly controversial in 1949, as the country witnessed a divisive miners' strike. While the strike lasted only seven weeks, from 27 June to 15 August, it had a severe impact on Australia's industrial and commercial activity, and had long-lasting consequences for the CPA.<sup>56</sup> Kiernan wrote to Dublin shortly after the strike's commencement, portraying it as a 'rehearsal' for a full-scale communist revolution, which would afford Australia's communists the opportunity to discover and remedy any 'defects' with their strategy before the revolution proper. Kiernan described the strike as 'the first great test of the Labour Government with Communism at work', and claimed that the communists intended to weaken the ALP before that year's Australian federal election: he felt that promises by the Liberal and Country parties to ban Australia's Communist Party, if implemented, would give the communists a useful pretence to press for further industrial unrest.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to Kiernan's claim that the strike would foment a communist revolution, its defeat served to significantly isolate the CPA in the 1950s.<sup>58</sup> Kiernan forwarded to Dublin examples of anti-strike initiatives by the Chifley government, such as a copy of the National Emergency (Coal Strike) Act, a temporary measure which enabled the government to prevent union funds from being used in support of the strike, as well as newspaper advertisements containing government and trade union appeals to miners to ignore communist trade union leaders.<sup>59</sup> Kiernan also informed Dublin about the convictions of several Miners' Federation figures under the new act, and police raids on Marx House, the CPA's Sydney headquarters. Noting a radio broadcast in which Chifley urged the miners to reject communism, which he characterised as an international movement aspiring

to overthrow 'the democratic way of life', the Minister Plenipotentiary informed Iveagh House that the government had agreed 'in principle' that the military be used to replace the striking miners, a division having already been moved into the New South Wales coalfields.<sup>60</sup>

After a month and a half of significant economic disruption, the hard-fought strike came to an end on 15 August; the jailings of union leaders and the use of Australian troops to mine coal in the workers' absence had helped to bring it to an end. Santamaria's Movement had emphasised to the country's Catholic hierarchy that the strike was 'communist-controlled', and Chifley's anti-communist stance was resolutely supported by Mannix, who asserted that Australia's communists had attempted to foment civil war in the country.<sup>61</sup> The strike was also treated extremely seriously by the British High Commissioner in Canberra, who wrote a lengthy report to London detailing the CPA's involvement in Australian trade unionism.<sup>62</sup> Kiernan, for his part, informed Dublin that 'the gaoling of the militant union leaders "knocked the stuffing" out of the communists' plan for a long strike'. In his view, communist efforts to damage the ALP had failed, as the Chifley government had taken 'action which only a Labor government could take', deploying anti-strike measures with the support of both anti-communist trade unionists and broader public opinion. Kiernan asserted that apathy amongst both the ALP and broader Australian society had permitted Australia's communists to become influential in the country's trade unions, claiming that '[Australian] individualism, which must have been strong in the pioneer period, has declined while pressure-groups have grown stronger'. However, he viewed the strike as waking the Australian labour movement out of its slumber on the question: 'Enmity between the industrial Left and Right is more savage than any political hostility between Labour and the Opposition Parties in Parliament'.<sup>63</sup>

The accuracy of Kiernan's analysis here is questionable; Deery argues that the jailing of union officials during the early phase of the coal strike increased the militancy and determination of the striking miners.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the CPA's growth during the 1940s can largely be attributed to increased public sympathy for the Soviet Union during the 'Red Army days' of the Second World War; this largely evaporated during the early Cold War, rather than, as Kiernan argued, as a result

of pressure groups.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, it was certainly true that the failure of the strike accelerated the decline of the CPA's influence within the unions; it consolidated the reach of the Industrial Groups within the Australian labour movement and accentuated anti-communist feelings within Australian society. Instead of increasing the CPA's strength, in Deery's words, it 'plunged the Communist Party into the wilderness of the 1950s, a position from which it never recovered'.<sup>66</sup>

The debates on whether the CPA should be formally proscribed by the Australian government also attracted the attention of Irish diplomats in Canberra, with Kiernan noting the ALP's hesitancy about proposals to ban the party. He informed Dublin in June 1947 that Dr Evatt, while noting that 'a careful review of the activities of the communist party' was necessary, felt that formally banning the CPA would 'tend to introduce fascism and destroy democracy'. In addition, an unnamed Labor MP and former government minister had told Kiernan that it was unlikely that Chifley's government would act to proscribe the communists, as the past mistreatment of other minorities in Australia, such as the Irish community, made it reluctant to introduce measures which could potentially be misused.<sup>67</sup> In March 1948, O'Riordan forwarded to Dublin a clipping from a Hansard debate of 4 March 1948, in which Chifley stated that 'the Government has previously indicated that it does not propose to place bans on any class of political philosophy or thought'.<sup>68</sup> Minutes forwarded to Dublin also highlight differences between the Chifley government and the Liberal opposition in Australia on how to respond to the Australian communist movement. In response to the May 1949 decision of the Liberal state government of Victoria to set up a Royal Commission to enquire into the CPA's activities in the state, Kiernan noted that Chifley firmly ruled out such a Commission occurring at a federal level, claiming that the experience of the Victorian Commission would illustrate the futility of the idea.<sup>69</sup>

After the Liberal-Country Party coalition led by Robert Menzies came to power federally in December 1949, the prospect of the CPA being banned became much more likely. Menzies honoured the Coalition's promise to ban the CPA by introducing the Communist Party Dissolution Act on 27 April 1950, though the legislation faced the barrier of the ALP-controlled Senate.<sup>70</sup> Resolutely anti-communist



Ireland had never implemented such a ban on communist activity, a point which became a matter of discussion in Australia during the referendum, as Kiernan would later note. He closely followed the public debate on the bill, unsurprisingly placing particular emphasis on coverage in the Catholic press and pronouncements from the Catholic hierarchy; and he forwarded to Dublin a summary of cuttings from Sydney's *Catholic Weekly*, which noted the paper's hope that Labor would not 'pour out a series of specious arguments against the measure which would only confuse the public'. Kiernan also highlighted Mannix's statement that the Bill was 'a bold attempt to go to the root of the trouble, and to cut out, once and for all, the cancer of atheistic communism in Australia'.<sup>71</sup> Kiernan later modified his views on Mannix's stance towards the bill, noting that the *Advocate*, while remaining supportive of Menzies's measure, subsequently conceded that the 'fears of some citizens that the bill may give rise to police tyranny cannot be lightly dismissed'. Mannix also indicated sympathy towards some of Labor's concerns. A statement by the Archbishop asserted that 'there is always the danger that emergency legislation may go too far and liberty which we should all prize may be sacrificed'; and this was also noted by Kiernan after being reported by the newspaper.<sup>72</sup>

As a *Sydney Morning Herald* clipping forwarded by Kiernan to Dublin stated, the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party ultimately voted by 34 votes to 27 to support the bill, albeit with some amendments to protect civil liberties.<sup>73</sup> Prominent party figures such as Evatt clearly retained a cautious attitude, as seen in Evatt's remark that 'laws used against a minority today might be used against another body tomorrow'.<sup>74</sup> The ACTU accepted Labor's position on the matter, but stated that its own preference was for the bill to be rejected outright; and Brendan O'Riordan indicated that there was discontent from the majority of government backbenchers about the bill on civil liberties grounds. Menzies's authority as prime minister was far from impregnable, O'Riordan suggested, noting that he had lost the position of prime minister in 1941 after both the Country Party and Liberal backbenchers had decided to no longer support him.<sup>75</sup>

A premonition of later tensions within Labor was also noted by O'Riordan when he informed Dublin of a vocal attack on Movement

influence within the trade unions by J.A. Ferguson, Federal and State President of the ALP, in October 1950. Ferguson, 'born a Catholic but alienated from the Church', was a frequent critic of Catholic Action, and was accused by the Movement of being a communist fellow-traveller.<sup>76</sup> Addressing a Methodist audience, Ferguson claimed that alleged 'organised infiltration' by the Catholic Church of the ALP and the broader labour movement was being mimicked by Protestant groups seeking to counterbalance Catholic influence. This 'political interference' from religious quarters was highly damaging, Ferguson suggested, as their members had little interest in trade unionism beyond exerting the influence of their particular faction. He questionably claimed that over eighty per cent of members of the Australian Railways Union were members of such groups.<sup>77</sup>

Although the bill had been passed in Parliament, its validity under Australian law was immediately contested by ten Australian unions and the CPA, in a High Court challenge. Evatt agreed to represent the communist-controlled Waterside Workers' Federation in the union-led High Court challenge, a move which caused 'consternation' within Labor and was 'bitterly opposed' by the Movement.<sup>78</sup> In March 1951, the High Court ruled in favour of the union case by a majority of six to one. While acknowledging it was the prerogative of the Executive, it declared that the powers the bill invested in the state would only be justified in a grave wartime situation, which the Court's members felt was not the case in Australia at that time, despite the presence of Australian troops in Korea.

Menzies was determined that the measure would pass regardless, and the Coalition government used a Labor rejection of a banking bill as the basis for calling another election, which was held on 28 April 1951, and saw the government parties gaining control of the Senate. Menzies then sought parliamentary support for a referendum on constitutional measures to ensure that a proscription would be possible.<sup>79</sup> Kiernan brought Dublin's attention to Menzies's claim in July 1951 that he now had a firm mandate to hold a referendum 'to ban the Australian Communist Party and communist organisations and to disqualify communists from holding certain offices'. He also highlighted Labor's advocacy of a rejection of the proposed referendum (in which the party went on to advocate

a no vote).<sup>80</sup> As Kiernan noted, the decision of three Catholic Labor members of the House of Representatives, Standish Keon, J.M. Mullens and Cyril Chambers, to abstain during the final vote on the referendum bill rather than adhere to Labor's stated support for a no vote.<sup>81</sup>

Alongside the referendum developments, Kiernan and embassy staff in Canberra remained attentive to state efforts to respond to communist infiltration of Australia's trade unions. Brendan O'Riordan noted charges laid against James 'Big Jim' Healy, the veteran communist head of the 'Waterside' Workers Federation, after the union had organised a boycott on New Zealand ships in solidarity with striking New Zealand watersiders.<sup>82</sup> O'Riordan later told Dublin in July that the Federation's head in Brisbane, Edward Englart, was fined £40 for his role in the dispute, while Healy had been fined £100 and sentenced to six weeks hard labour.<sup>83</sup>

Labor had arguably lost the figure best able to hold the party together in June 1951, when Ben Chifley, Labor's leader since 1945, died suddenly. The 'brilliant but unpredictable' Evatt replaced him as Labor's leader, heralding a new era for the party which would see its internal contradictions come to a disastrous head.<sup>84</sup> Evatt emphasised Labor's opposition to the referendum measure during a private meal at Kiernan's home, a conversation underlining the strength of Kiernan's networks in Canberra, which he promptly reported to Dublin. Insisting to Kiernan that he was not afraid to stand by the Catholic Church when he felt it was just, Evatt noted that he had defended well-known Irish priests of Irish republican sympathies such as the well-known Fr Michael O'Flanagan; had been criticised by Protestant organisations for vocally condemning the imprisonment of Cardinal Mindszenty of Hungary by the country's communist government; and had been praised by Pius XII for advocating the internationalisation of the city of Jerusalem and its holy places following the foundation of Israel. However, Evatt had been 'incensed' by the behaviour of some Catholic clergymen in the run-up to the referendum, Kiernan told Dublin.<sup>85</sup> A sermon given by a priest in Evatt's constituency, which urged worshippers 'not to vote for any person who defends communists', was viewed by Evatt as an attack on him personally, and he believed Cardinal Gilroy of Sydney was encouraging such sermons. Gilroy and Archbishop Duhig were identified by Evatt as two of the clergymen who were 'taking such one-sided action in favour

of the Menzies Party', and he felt their activities should be brought to the attention of Pius XII. Evatt noted as evidence of this belief that a defence of him by Labor's Arthur Calwell, written for Catholic audiences, had only been published by Melbourne's *Advocate* newspaper, while other influential Catholic periodicals, such as Sydney's *Catholic Weekly*, had failed to do so – a move Evatt also blamed on Gilroy. Evatt perceptively noted that a fall-out between the ALP and the Catholic Church would be damaging for both bodies, but the decision by the Movement not to attend the meeting which decided on Labor's opposition to the measures postponed a split for the time being, in Kiernan's view.<sup>86</sup>

Kiernan continued to monitor the referendum's progress. He was particularly interested in a broadcast in which Arthur Calwell had instanced the fact that Britain and Ireland had not banned communism as a reason why Australian voters should reject the measure. While de Valera headed a country that was '90 per cent Catholic', the fact that neither he nor Churchill, although 'poles apart in their political opinion', had made moves to ban communism, according to Calwell demonstrated that there was 'no moral difficulty in fighting communism while safeguarding freedom'. Kiernan suggested to Dublin that de Valera might be interested in the broadcast's details, highlighting it for the Taoiseach's personal attention.<sup>87</sup>

The referendum was ultimately defeated on 22 September by a narrow margin of 52,082 votes. Given Catholic support for the measure was 46 per cent, the silence of leading members of the Catholic hierarchy such as Mannix and Gilroy was arguably decisive.<sup>88</sup> Appraising Dublin of the result, Kiernan viewed the defeat as the result of a vigorous campaign by Evatt, a lacklustre one by the Liberals, opposition to the referendum from a number of academics and Protestant clergymen, and a response to the potential dismissal of thousands of Commonwealth public servants.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

While the fact that staunchly anti-communist Ireland never sought to formally proscribe membership of communist organisations was trumpeted by some opponents of Menzies's move to ban the CPA, the

ultimately negligible influence Ireland's communists had on the Irish labour movement and Irish society generally meant that such measures never had to be considered. This contrasted with Australia, where the CPA had substantial influence within the Australian labour movement, something which both the Chifley and Evatt governments regarded as a substantial threat in the industrial sphere. The attempted banning of the CPA did not influence the responses of Irish governments to internal communist activity in their own territory. Nonetheless, despite being a peripheral cold war actor which remained outside NATO – and having no substantive internal communist 'threat' in its own right – the Irish government paid close attention to state responses to communism in Britain, the United States and the white Commonwealth, and Australia was a particular focus of attention due to the prominence of Catholic anti-communism there.

The research on which this article is based demonstrates that Kiernan's ideological framework for interpreting Australia's domestic Cold War was based upon Irish conceptions of Catholic anti-communism, which was reinforced by his Catholic contacts in Australia. This framework sometimes led to mistakes in his analyses, as we have seen. An over-reliance on Catholic laity and clergy as a source of information on Australian communism, as well as his frequent reliance on media reports, often led Kiernan to give Dublin a distorted or exaggerated impression of Australian communism, instanced by his concern that the 1949 Australian coal strike presaged a full-scale communist revolt. Nonetheless, the unique and eventful nature of Australia's domestic Cold War made it a particular area of interest for Iveagh House in seeking to explore how western countries confronted the internal challenges of communism. Kiernan's reports fortified the Irish state's perception of communist ideology and activity as a worldwide threat which Catholics were in the forefront of combating.

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